

Sight-Sailing program for the blind

By JUSTIN GRAEBER, CLIPPER EDITOR
JUSTIN@DUXBURYCLIPPER.COM

Peg Hawkins didn't know what she was getting into when she answered that newspaper ad.

The mother of six was, at the time, a Newton resident who kept a summer home in Duxbury. (She now lives in Duxbury year round.)

"My children were growing and I was looking for something to do," she said. "I saw an ad in the local newspaper looking for someone with the ability to shift gears – I thought, what a perfect thing for a mother of six."

The ad was for an administrative assistant to vice president at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton. Hawkins still works for that man, Arthur O'Neill, although her responsibilities have grown over the years.

The Carroll Center works with all types of blind people, from those born totally blind to people who are only legally blind and still have some degree of sight. However, Hawkins said the center's specialty is working with adults who have recently become blind.

"People come in ... we've got people who are angry, who are overwhelmed, or who come in kicking and screaming because they don't want to be there and a family member has convinced them to try," Hawkins said. The program is residential, meaning attendees live on the campus for the duration of their program.



Peg Hawkins is on far right as she joined the Carroll Center blind sailing team who competed in the Blind Sailing World Championships in New Zealand, 2009, returning with a bronze medal. Hawkins was one of the Team managers.

Courtesy photos

"We teach them how to cope, and how to continue to do the things they've always done .. it's not the end, it's the beginning of a new way of life," she said.

She said the recently sightless often get help from being around people in the same situation.

"They learn to relate to each other," she said. "There's been some really wonderful friendships formed as a result of the residential program."

Hawkins has some experience with blind people, when her children were in the Newton school system, she was in-

involved in the "Understanding Handicapped" program. But for the most part, it was a bit of a culture shock.

"It's basically just another portion of who they are. It does not define them," she said. "I like to say a person who we are serving is not defined by their blindness ... they're first and foremost a person."

Years before Hawkins came to the center in 1995, O'Neill wanted to start recreational programs at the center. Just because someone doesn't have their sight doesn't mean they have to stop doing physical activities, Hawkins said. She pointed out that there have been blind runners in the Boston Marathon – connected by a line to a sighted runner. Carroll Center students even go downhill skiing.

One of their marquee programs, however, is SailBlind, a blind sailing program of which Hawkins is the coordinator.

"I coordinate the whole program, making travel arrangements, making sure we have the right number of sighted guides, etc.," she said.

The program is based out of the Charlestown Navy Yard.

"As the coordinator for the Carroll Center's SailBlind Program, Peg Hawkins has been a most valuable resource for maintaining the momentum of the program and the blind persons it serves," O'Neill said in an e-mail. "Her attention

to detail and her understanding of the needs of the blind sailors has been a big part of the program's success over the years."

The program has two components, a recreational program and a competitive one. In 1992, the center was approached by New Zealand, who was holding the first blind international sailing competition.

"They held their own but they didn't come home with any medals," Hawkins said,

Since then, the Carroll team has gone to Australia, Italy, Rhode Island, England (where they won a silver medal) and Hawkins is planning on journeying to Japan in 2013 with the team – even though she'll be retiring in a few weeks after working at the center for 16 years.

"I've loved every bit of it," she said.

For two and a half years, she's also served as treasurer of Blind Sailing International, the body that governs competitive blind sailing. By international rules, each boat has two sighted sailors and two blind sailors.

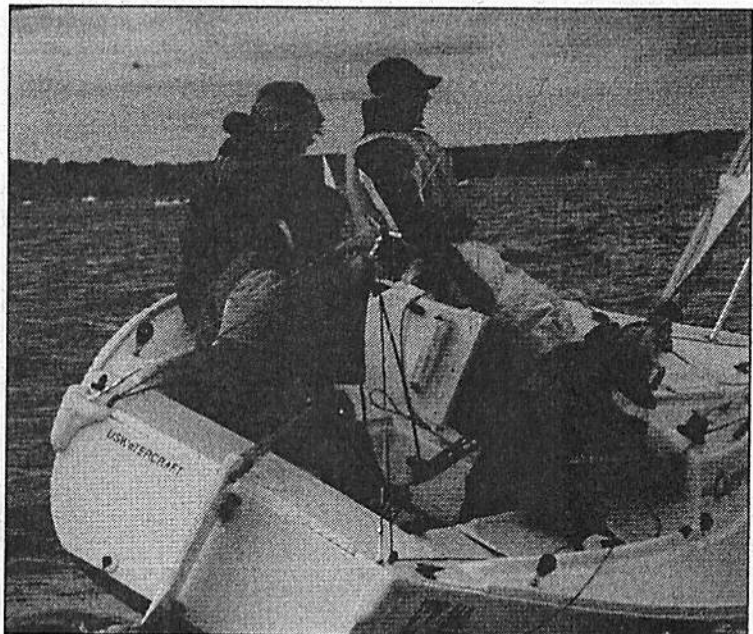
"The sighted people basically give verbal instructions on how to sail the boat," she said.

For the foreseeable future, the Bryant Avenue resident will enjoy her 10 grandchildren and her garden. She has, however, toyed with the idea of getting involved with a local program like the Access-Sail program at Duxbury Bay Maritime School.

"I've made wonderful friends through the program," Hawkins said of her time at the Carroll Center. "To see the look on these guys and women's faces when they come off the water ... they just put their whole heart and soul into it, they just have so much fun."

"She will leave big void in the program when she retires but I am grateful that Peg has agreed to continue helping out as a volunteer for the duration of the season," O'Neill said.

For more information on the Carroll Center, visit their Web site at carroll.org.



Blind Sailor Matt Chao at the helm with his team racing in Newport for the National Championships. Under Blind Sailing International Rules, there are two sighted and two blind sailors in each boat.